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Music in Korean Shaman Ritual – by Simon Mills

It is hard to sum up Korean Shamanism in a few sentences but, in short, it could be described as the traditional syncretic folk religion of Korea. It mixes together ritual practices, beliefs, symbols and myths from Buddhism, Taoism, and folklore and adds elements commonly associated with nature religions and shamanism – including the use of techniques such as divination, trance, and mediumship. As with many other syncretic folk religions around the globe, there is very little in the way of dogma, codified rules, or centralized leadership, which means that a great diversity of practices and beliefs can be found.

In Korea, the diverse practices of traditional folk religion are often referred to by academics as '*mu-sok'*, 'the customs of mediumship'. The Chinese character for this '*mu'* – 巫– is often interpreted as being a representation of two intermediaries standing between and linking two different planes of existence, this world and another. The intermediaries themselves, generally known as '*mudang'* in Korea, are usually referred to as 'shamans' in English because of similarities to other shamans around the globe, particularly the archetypical Siberian shamans. These days, most *mudang* are women – although there is a small minority of male *mudang* (who are often gay and/or transvestite) – and most of the people who attend the *mudang*'s rituals are also women. As Choi Hee An says, "Shamanistic rituals and storytelling provide women with a cathartic release from their oppressive reality and empower them to share their pain" (2005: 17)[1].

There are two main types of *mudang*, which were formerly located in different parts of Korea: charismatic *mudang* to the North (above the Han River) and hereditary *mudang* to the South. Charismatic *mudang*, who have so-called 'spirit power', are generally called to the profession; after finding themselves psychologically unable to conform to the social roles expected of them by family and friends, they experience a breakdown, after which they become apprenticed to a *mudang*, acquire techniques to control their own and others' spirits, and finally emerge as reconstituted healers. In their rituals, charismatic *mudang* tend to focus on summoning spirits into their own bodies, delivering oracles and displaying divine power (often through feats involving knives). Meanwhile, the hereditary *mudang* tend not to have these powers. Instead they prove ritual efficacy by displaying extensive esoteric knowledge and impressive performing skills – performing complex and highly accomplished dance, song, and music. This latter type of *mudang* is born into the profession, learns from the family, and practices and performs in the context of a guild-like family organisation, with the male family members playing music and the women officiating. The situation has changed dramatically over the course of the 20th Century: the hereditary *mudang* and the styles of ritual that they have fostered are rapidly disappearing while the charismatic *mudang* are now widespread throughout the whole country.

[1] An, Choi Hee (2005) *Korean Women and God: Experiencing God in a Multi-religious Colonial Context.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

A Late 19th Century Painting of a Shaman Ritual

Many types of shaman ritual are still widely performed in Korea, including rituals to bring good luck to the individual, family, and community, rituals to expel negative spirits, and rituals to soothe the spirits of the recently dead and support bereaved family members. The vast majority of rituals are small-scale and are concerned with addressing a client's specific problems; these feature prayer and chanting (usually of Buddhist texts) but don't generally involve dance, musical performance, or song. Full rituals (*kut*) involving all types of artistic performance are far more expensive and much rarer, often requiring rental of a suitable performance space, recruitment of helpers and musicians, and extensive preparations, including the decoration of the ritual space with richly symbolic images, amulets, and props, and the setting up of an altar, laden with fruit, drinks, cakes and other offerings. Every *kut* consists of a prescribed succession of sections, each dedicated to appeasing a specific god or group of gods. First, the chosen god or spirit is summoned (into the mudang herself, into a spirit vessel, or just to attend the ritual space). Next, the *mudang* diagnoses the root causes of problems through deduction, oracle, or divination and seeks to appease spirits through prayer, entertainment and offerings, providing opportunities for those present to take part in therepeutic and cathartic psychodrama. Finally, at the end of each section, the spirit is sent off. Musical instruments and the sounds they produce tend to be amongst the *mudang*'s most essential tools throughout these proceedings.

In certain traditions, ensembles of melody instruments have featured – for example in the hereditary shaman rituals of the South-Western Chŏlla Provinces – but it is now very rare to encounter them in live ritual performance, given in private for paying clients. Rather, it is percussive sounds that have become utterly integral to Korean shaman ritual performance. The ritual ensemble most commonly involves a double-headed hourglass drum (*changgo*) and a large gong (*ching*), laid out horizontally on a mat or suspended on a stand. However, there may also be additional gongs, cymbals (*para*) and bells (*pangul*) and, in the East Coast hereditary shamans' performance, there are

small hand-gongs (*kkwaenggwari*). Percussive instrumental sounds contribute to the *mudang*'s rituals in various ways: firstly, they aid the summoning of spirits and help to create the impression of divine presence; secondly, they help to banish unwanted spirits and give the impression that the ritual space is 'clean'; thirdly, they provide background accompaniment and structure for the *mudang*'s songs and sequences of ritual procedures; and fourthly, they encourage cathartic behaviour amongst all the participants – especially dancing and singing.

Dancing Before the Altar (Photo Courtesy of Simon Mills)

In the charismatic *mudang*'s ritual, percussive sounds often function as an aid to the *mudang*'s trance state. A commonplace practice is for the ritual musicians to play repeated pulses or simple rhythms loudly and for long periods of time while the *mudang* executes vigorous repetitive physical movements, spinning around in circles or jumping up and down, and sometimes shouting out 'faster' or 'slower' or using gesture to indicate an optimal tempo to the musicians. When in a hyperstimulated state, the *mudang*'s normal cognitive functions are inhibited and her sense of self has diminished; she has entered a trance state and is able to receive the invited spirit. Some *mudang* appear to require less preparation than others and there are even exceptional *mudang* who accept spirits into themselves without any prior trance-promoting stimuli at all.

It is not only for the *mudang*'s benefit that crashing percussive sounds accompany the summoning of spirits. It is, in fact, for everyone. Somewhat akin to the traditional drum roll that signals the climax of a magician's trick (but much louder and longer), the percussive sounds invoke a build up of suspense; as soon as they begin, everyone knows from previous experience that something fantastic is about to happen. Some also consider the crashing percussion sounds effective in attracting the

attention of the invited spirit – somewhat like shouting “We’re over here!” And within the confined ritual space, the deafeningly loud sounds quickly bamboozle all present so that it becomes very difficult to think of anything else but the sounds and movements of the present moment. Like the bright colours of the paraphernalia and offerings that adorn the altar and the whole space, the sounds help to take people out of themselves and transform the ritual space into a ‘happening’ place – a meeting venue for people and spirits, existing somewhere between the normal plane of existence and the world of the unknown.

Shaman Ritual Musicians (Photo Courtesy of Simon Mills)

Intriguingly, much the same sounds used to attract spirits are also used to expel them. Miscellaneous lowly ghosts (*chapkwi* or *chabshin*) are thought to linger wherever people assemble and, although they are generally thought of as rather pitiful, they are still considered to be potentially dangerous, especially for ritual attendees who are in a somewhat fragile and vulnerable state. Accordingly, before, after, and periodically throughout ritual, *mudang* perform purifying procedures to dispel these ghosts away from the ritual space. It is common for alcohol and scraps of food to be thrown outside to tempt them away and, varying according to tradition, fire, pure water, Buddhist chant, symbolic actions involving knives, and – once again – crashing percussion sounds may also be used. In the style of ritual performed by hereditary musicians in the East Coast provinces, for example, a specific rhythm is played for this purpose – a fast 4/4 rhythm called ‘*sajap’uri’* , which consists of the following note durations: long, long, short, short, long. The name ‘*sajap’uri’* is indicative of the rhythm’s expurgative function: while the ‘*saja’* are amongst the scariest of all spirits – the messengers of the Kings of the Underworld who come to collect people’s spirits –, ‘*p’uri’*

signifies ‘banishment’. This rhythm is central to all exorcistic moments in East Coast shaman ritual; played vigorously with strong accents on the first two beats, it is considered an effective means to ‘beat away the ghosts’ (‘*subuch’igi’*) and keep the ritual space clean.

In their rituals, *mudang* tend to lead their clients through a varied programme of therepeutic episodes, seeking to address profound problems in a thorough manner. A large array of memorised texts, ritual actions, and interactive dramas are performed and, accordingly, the rituals often continue for many hours, sometimes over the course of several days. Music crucially helps to establish structure, signalling the beginnings and ends of sections, and attributing successive sections with contrasting moods. The most accomplished ritual musicians specialising in the hereditary styles of ritual employ a startling array of musical patterns for these purposes but even the least skilful of accompanists will have a small repertoire of contrasting rhythms, generally including *kutkŏri* (12/8, medium/slow), *chajinmori* (12/8, faster), *hwimori* (12/8 or 4/4, fast), and a few pop-style backing rhythms (used to accompany karaoke episodes). Many *mudang* include narrative songs during their rituals. Often set to a lilting *kutkŏri* backing, these songs tell of life’s trials and tribulations, helping those present realise that they are not alone in their suffering and indicating effective and ineffective ways of behaving in particular situations.

A Large Community Ritual in Progress (Photo Courtesy of Simon Mills)

Many *mudang* claim that ‘*p’uri’* is the overriding objective of their rituals – the ‘banishment’ not just of unwelcome spirits but of all negative feelings. Accordingly, in their rituals, they tend to look beyond simply identifying problems, diagnosing causes, and suggesting practical solutions; using a variety of psychotherepeutic techniques, they encourage all who are present to pool their energies and cathartically unleash their pent-up emotions. And after each outpouring of anger and sorrow, everyone joins together in a playful celebration of life’s most uplifting elements – good relationships,

hopes for the future, and pleasurable pastimes. In many cases, these celebratory episodes are greatly enhanced by music, with the *mudang* encouraging people to get up on their feet, sing their favourite songs – popular hits with happy associations for all –, and dance to the pounding rhythms of the ritual drum.

This short article has considered music's various roles within Korean shaman ritual, as performed by *mudang* for paying clients in private contexts. It has been shown that, within these forums for therepeutic interaction, the musical components (like all other elements of ritual) are very much tailored towards providing all those present with well-rounded healing experiences. Over the past few decades, however, it has become increasingly common to encounter the shamanic ritual arts in far less interactive environments, namely on concert stages within what Park terms "quasi-folkloric shows" (2003: 362)[2]. Since the early 1980s, a small selection of leading *mudang* have been appointed as 'Intangible Cultural Assets' – the living representatives of their particular styles of ritual – and one of their duties is to perform together with their students in concert contexts. A small minority of traditions have actually now become secularised performing arts, only ever seen on stage and never performed for clients in private, and it is to be expected that several other traditions may soon follow. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that other shamanic traditions, meanwhile, continue to flourish: these Korean traditional performing arts continue to be wholly relevant active forces for change in 21st Century lives.

Suggested Further Reading

Howard, Keith (2006) *Preserving Korean Music: Intangible Cultural Properties as Icons of Identity (Perspectives on Korean Music, Volume 1).* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Lee, Yong-shik (2004) *Shaman Ritual Music in Korea*. Seoul: Jimoondang International.

Mills, Simon (2007) *Healing Rhythms: The World of South Korea's East Coast Hereditary Shamans*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Seo, Maria (2002) *Hanyang Kut: Korean Shaman Ritual Music from Seoul*. London: Routledge

Walraven, Boudewijn (1994) *Songs of the Shaman: The Ritual Chants of the Korean Mudang*. London: Routledge

[2] Park, Mikyung (2003) Korean shaman rituals revisited: The case of Chindo Ssikkim-kut (Cleansing Rituals). *Ethnomusicology, 47/3*, 355–375.